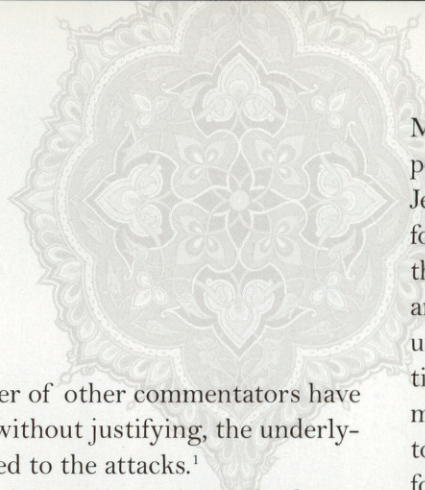




Is Islam Really a Peaceful Religion?

By Malcolm Russell

As the days that followed September 11, 2001, merged into weeks and months, a surprising level of analysis began to puncture the initial perceptions of why the attacks took place. The first responses were simplistic. In the speech to Congress and the nation that may otherwise mark his finest hour, President George W. Bush depicted America's attackers as hating "Our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other," to the point of desiring to kill Christians, Jews, and all Americans. On October 15, however, *Newsweek* published Fareed Zakaria's cover story, "Why They Hate Us." The article presented a rather different



picture, and any number of other commentators have attempted to explain, without justifying, the underlying resentments that led to the attacks.¹

Although much has been written about “fundamentalism” in Islam, attention in academe and by the media usually finds other aspects (women, terrorism, repression, the Israeli-Arab conflict) more interesting than Islam’s traditional political conceptions. As *Spectrum* ventures into foreign affairs, this essay attempts to consider the dissonance faithful Muslims find between the religious and philosophical teachings of traditional Islam and modern practices of international relations. The issues behind that dissonance are distant from our perspective about the role of government because Seventh-day Adventists strongly support separation of church and state. However, Adventists familiar with Old Testament concepts of governance will find a number of parallels between them and Islam.

Pious (and not necessarily fundamentalist) Muslims suffer this dissonance because Western ideas about the nature of government dominate the world. At the most basic level, the West conceives a secular government, based on the nation-state, seeking its goals from the desires of its citizens, creating its own laws, and operating its foreign policy in its own self-interest. In such realms, the important criteria are human choices and well-being.

In contrast, Islam calls believers to live in a community of the faithful, subject to God’s precepts. Ideally, neither nations nor rival Islamic governments should exist; foreign relations become a matter of spreading Islamic rule—God’s law—around the globe. Thus, Muslims face a world where governments—often including their own—and international relations defy Islamic precepts, which are based on Scripture (the Qur’an) and the tradition (the sunna) of their religious community.

The Cornerstone of Muslim Understanding of Government

Western Christians can most easily approach Islamic theories of government and international relations by starting with the contrast between Jesus the Messiah and

Muhammad the Messenger of Allah. Rejecting contemporary expectations that the Messiah would liberate Jewish society from Roman rule, Jesus instructed his followers with the familiar command, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17, KJV). Christianity took form under the pressures of persecution; after the resurrection, its followers certainly spread a revolutionary message to the world, and their radical ethics eventually toppled polytheist Rome. However, early Christianity focused attention on preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven, not the seizure of power on earth.

When both ruler and subjects became Christian during the reign of Emperor Constantine, centuries of conflict between church and state followed. Sometimes this conflict was philosophical, but often it was physical. The immense bloodshed of the Thirty Years War (1618–48) and other religiously linked conflicts set Northern Europe firmly on a course that separated governments from religious authority and helped lead to foreign policies that served national interests, rather than those of the clergy.² Literally as well as symbolically, the writings of Machiavelli and Hugo Grotius replaced the Bible and St. Augustine as guides to government behavior.

Like Christ, Muhammad began public life as a prophet, in his case in the western Arabian city of Mecca, after an intense vision around A.D. 610.³ Warning of divine punishments to come, he called Meccan society to repent from unbelief, idolatry, and exploitation of the poor. His initial messages from Allah, the God of the Old Testament, share the flavor of the Hebrew prophets.⁴ As an example, consider Sura LXXX, “He Frowned”:⁵

Perish Man! How unthankful he is!
Of what did He create him?
Of a sperm-drop
He created him, and determined him,
then the way eased for him,
then makes him to die, and buries him,
then, when He wills, He raises him.
No indeed! Man has not accomplished His bidding.

Let Man consider his nourishment.
We poured out the rains abundantly,
then We split the earth in fissures
and therein made the grains to grow
and vines, and reeds,
and olives, and palms,

Because Muhammad had cleansed the region of non-Muslims through conversion, exile, or massacre, later Muslim tradition stressed the importance of keeping it pure of unbelievers.

and dense-tree'd gardens,
and fruits, and pastures,
an enjoyment for you and your flocks.

And when the Blast shall sound,
upon the day when a man shall flee from his brother,
his mother, his father,
his consort, his sons,
every man that day shall have business to suffice him.
Some faces on that day shall shine
laughing, joyous;
some faces on that day shall be dusty
o'erspread with darkness—
those—they are the unbelievers, the libertines.

The Meccan economy prospered on long-distance trade facilitated by an annual month-long truce that permitted pilgrims to cross the deserts in relative safety and worship at Mecca's shrines. Muhammad not only condemned leading merchants for their pride and refusal to care for the poor, he also attacked the many idols whose shrines provided the foundation of the merchants' prosperity. Opposition and persecution followed, and in 622, Muhammad left Mecca for the oasis of Medina to become its civic leader. This emigration, the *Hijra*, (sometimes translated "flight") became the turning point for the Islamic calendar. The symbolism is appropriate; the Hijra transformed Muhammad from an oppressed preacher to a civic leader and arbiter of the Muslim community. Unlike Christ, but like Moses, Muhammad became ruler and lawgiver.

Having escaped persecution by the idol-worshipping Meccans, Muhammad soon led attacks against them, cutting their trade routes and repelling Meccan reprisals. Moreover, as his opponents in Medina converted, fled, or were killed on grounds of treason, he became the sole executive and legislator of the city-state. Mecca surrendered in 630, and the Islamic pilgrimage, the hajj, replaced the pagan one.

The new responsibilities were reflected in prophetic messages that differed dramatically from the brief, almost sonnet-like utterings from the time spent in Mecca. Because the Qur'an is traditionally organized by chapter length, the longer, and chronologically

later, Medinan messages are typically found in the first part, where they often daunt hesitant readers with details of matters like inheritance.⁶

By 632, Muhammad directly ruled the Hijaz, today the western province of Saudi Arabia, and most tribes of the entire peninsula submitted to his authority. His birthplace, Mecca, formed with Medina the Haramain, the two sacred (or protected) places.⁷ Because Muhammad had cleansed the region of non-Muslims through conversion, exile, or massacre, later Muslim tradition stressed the importance of keeping it pure of unbelievers. Elsewhere, Christians and Jews—"People of the Book"—who submitted to Muslim rule would be treated with tolerance, though at the price of heavier taxes, second-class citizenship, and distance from the ruling Muslims. As the Qur'an warned, "O believers, take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other."⁸ The fate of idol worshipers remained harsh, defined by the basic command "Kill the polytheists wherever you find them." Muslim believers were to carry forward Allah's commission to spread Islamic beliefs.

The early Muslims expected Christ's return, the resurrection, and God's final judgment almost immediately. Possibly for this reason Muhammad evidently failed to designate either the individual or institution to rule the Islamic community after his death. That came in 632, following a brief illness, and left the Muslim community leaderless. However, a relatively small group in Medina rapidly proclaimed his close friend and father-in-law, Abu Bakr, the *khalifat rasul Allah*, literally "Successor to the Messenger of God."

Muhammad had filled many different roles. He exercised great control over the community of Muslims, many of whom had broken their clan and tribal links at least temporarily when they converted to Islam. He had administered Medina, as a seventh-century city manager. By dint of conquest, the many tribes of Arabia's deserts and mountains acknowledged him as supreme chieftain, oftentimes a very



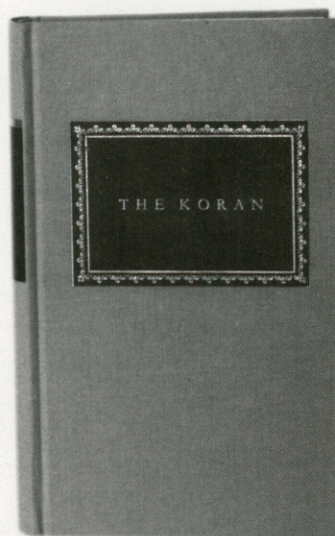
personal rather than institutional loyalty. What roles would his successor fill?

Though invoking religious terminology in their claims to office, neither Abu Bakr nor his successors ever claimed authority in religious dogma, let alone any prophetic calling. The final prophet for the earth's last days had appeared and died; God's last messages had been delivered. No one could replace Muhammad as God's messenger, but the community needed a leader, and there was no priesthood. While deferring to Muslim scholars over the interpretation of Islamic law, the caliph would enforce it over the territories he ruled, lead the faithful in prayer and battle, and symbolize the community of God's believers. Another common title for the caliph was perhaps more descriptive of the essentially nonspiritual role: *Amir al-Mu'minin*, Commander of the Faithful.

In the centuries that followed the caliphate came to play a far more central role than emperors or kings in the West. Jesuit orientalist Henri Lammens may have exaggerated a century ago when he claimed that sects arose in Islam over disputes about the caliphate.⁹ Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that the broader theory of the caliphate and purpose of the Islamic state lie behind the anti-Western resentment that reached its extreme forms on September 11, 2001.

Clearly, the broad equality and democracy of desert nomads influenced expectations of the caliphate. Rather than submit to hereditary authority, Arab tribes selected their best leader in war and peace as their *shaykh*. Likewise, according to theories developed over the centuries, adult male Muslims should select a new caliph when death rendered the office vacant. In practice, many caliphs attempted to designate their successors and manipulate the selection. Nevertheless, a sense of popular involvement in selecting leaders remains in Islam.

Some critics dismiss this sense of Islamic democracy by pointing out that Islam reached its zenith under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, or that today a disproportionately high number of the world's hereditary rulers are Muslim.¹⁰ For a pious Muslim, however, neither those shortcomings nor the lack of



established procedures for popular choice detract from a sense that Islamic rule is somehow democratic, a far cry from most Middle Eastern states today.

In theory, if not always in practice, the great obligation of any caliph was to carry out Islam's ultimate mission, the jihad to establish "the supremacy of Allah's word over this world."¹¹ In Muslim thought, the world was divided into two opposing camps. The *Dar al-Harb*, or Abode of War, applied to all regions outside the rule of Muslim law, for example, Christian Europe or Hindu India. By contrast, God's law was applied in the *Dar al-Islam*, the Abode of Islam. Although the word *Islam* itself means "submission," its Arabic root of the three consonants s-l-m carries strong implications of "peace" and "security," reflected in the widely recognized form of the root, *salaam*, and the Hebrew *shalom*.

Popular commentators and the American propaganda machine recently seized this sense of peacefulness to proclaim that "Islam is a religion of peace." Certainly, this is true: Islam promises the protection of Allah to the humblest believer. It does so because the *Dar al-Islam* is essentially a nomocracy, a society under the rule of divine law.¹² What could be more peaceful for the believer? Moreover, this law extended far greater toleration to Christian and Jewish subjects than Muslims and Jews received in Europe during the middle ages.

However, there is also a darker, warlike side of Islam that many of the current commentaries often overlook. This is the crux of my argument. First, it was the duty of the Islamic community (*Umma*) to extend the realm of Islam into the Abode of War. Second, and more fundamentally, relationships with non-Muslim societies were determined not by reason or logic, but by

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Muhammed's revelations interpreted by early Muslim thinkers. Put starkly, for a pious Muslim, the legitimate relationships of Christians and Muslims are fixed for the duration of human history. They were set by divine command fourteen hundred years ago.

Every baptized Adventist recognizes the gospel commission to go into all the world, preaching and teaching all nations before the end comes. Like Christianity, Islam recognizes the importance of persuasion in spreading the faith. This is literally effort, or exertion, spreading belief in Allah. Particularly in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, this is exactly how Islam expanded, as merchant communities shared their faith.

But "exertion" translates as "jihad," and although the doctrine of jihad covers proselytizing, for centuries it also carried harsher overtones for nonbelievers. Even more ambiguous than many Arab words—it may be translated as "struggle," as Arberry does—it may alternatively imply strife, war, and fighting.¹³ For the first sense of the word, personal effort for the faith became a duty of Muslims, though not a numbered addition to the famous five pillars or personal obligations. However, warlike "jihad," led by the caliph, became an obligation of the entire Islamic community, for its underlying purpose was to spread the law and message of Allah through all the earth.

So, in practical terms, Islam is not fundamentally a religion of peace. Far from striving to eliminate conflict with other societies, Muslim society bears a collective responsibility for warlike struggle to subject non-Muslims to the law of Islam (though not necessarily to convert them). *There can be no peace between the Dar al-Islam and the Dar al-Harb, only periods of truce.*

During the fourteen hundred Islamic years since Muhammad died, actual conditions in the Muslim world rarely matched those outlined above. Two of the first four caliphs died violently, including 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. After a century, rival rulers each claimed to be the caliph. Eventually, Muslim states, allied with Christians, fought other Muslims. For the past thousand years, the caliphate has carried no political significance, and it disappeared

in the 1920s. By then, most regions of the Muslim world had become colonies of one or another European power as the Dar al-Islam contracted.

But historical memory is always selective, and for extremists like Osama bin Laden the worldview is confined and shaped by events in classical Islam, fourteen hundred years ago. Moreover, for many sensitive Arab Muslims the present seems oppressive. The twentieth century witnessed defeat after defeat by Israel, and rule by largely undemocratic governments from Morocco in the Arab West to Iraq in the Arab East.

Eighty years ago, hopes lay in Arab nationalism, but unity proved a mirage. Five decades ago, Marxism or at least an alliance with the Soviet Union seemed to offer progress and weaponry, but these hopes proved false as generation after generation of Soviet arms proved inadequate. A quarter century ago, control over oil promised prosperity and power, but boom turned to bust. For Arab Muslims who feel wronged by the state of the world, the only solace, the only hope, appears to be Islam, in a form that will strike back at the myriad injustices.

Viewed from this perspective, the massacres of September 11, 2001, were not simple anti-Americanism, or punishment for social evils. Apparently, Osama bin Laden never included pornography and other social sins in his list of American wrongdoing. The hijackers themselves were not poor Africans or Bangladeshis so envious of our riches that they rubbed out a great symbol of U.S. financial power. Instead, they came from better-off Arab Gulf states or from middle-class families elsewhere. They grew up with wealth to travel abroad, and learned to speak English. Many had servants at home, and enough education to enter pilot training programs. Above all, their goals were political.

Osama bin Laden himself has frequently repeated three grievances to justify his openly violent campaign against America: the presence of U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia; the U.S. treatment of Iraq; and, finally, U.S. support for Israel. His wide appeal in the



Arab and Muslim world becomes most understandable in the context of the traditional Muslim conception of relations with nonbelievers.

Significantly, the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia usually receives first mention; it may be the prime motivating factor. Having waded through the discussion above, the reader can now understand why those troops affront local public opinion in ways that bases in Germany, Italy, or even Japan do not. The American bases in Arabia are used to patrol the skies of Iraq, a fellow Muslim Arab nation with which Saudi Arabia ought to ally against Zionism and the West.¹⁴

The bases themselves house unbelievers of both sexes whose private lives no doubt involve drinking, social mixing, and many other activities contrary to the Qur'an. Most of all, these bases are located in Saudi Arabia, the land of the two sacred sites, the haramain. In all sorts of detailed ways, Saudi society attempts to revive pure Islam and reject the man-made additions of fourteen hundred years of history. Now its government symbolizes its oppression and tyranny by providing military bases for the unbelievers!

The second grievance is U.S. policy that has condemned the pitiful inhabitants of Iraq's dictatorship to a decade of economic misery and social decline, including the collateral deaths of a few hundred thousand children from poor sanitary conditions, hospitals without equipment, and food shortages. This must offend Osama bin Laden and his supporters, for he must share the feelings of virtually all non-Kuwaiti

Arabs. But Osama's mindset presumably goes further and interprets these events as unbelievers attacking the Dar al-Islam, whereas the right order of things would be a jihad in the opposite direction.

Osama's third and oldest grievance is the U.S. support of Israel. Israel lies beyond the scope of this article, and the plight of the Palestinians has too often been manipulated cynically by other Arabs. However, it is also worth remembering that such manipulation can only take place because resentment over Palestine lies deep in almost every Arab's emotions. Once again, Osama's religiously influenced worldview finds much more at stake than the clash over a small bit of territory. Instead, Jerusalem, the starting point of Muhammad's night journey to heaven and thus the third holiest shrine of Islam, has fallen to the Jews.¹⁵

Where does all this leave Americans, collectively and individually? After the dust clears from Afghanistan, after we bring to justice at least some of those we can implicate for the attacks on New York and the Pentagon, we will have an unrivaled opportunity to seize the moral high ground.

Withdrawal from the Saudi bases, and perhaps their mothballing, could be simple and quick. Rather than abandon the Afghans to poverty, anarchy, and the repression of women, as we did after the Soviet withdrawal, we ought to become a source of generous assistance to suffering peoples, provided they can govern themselves with at least minimal standards of humanity. Toward Iraq, it is likely that even Machiavelli would counsel replacing the sanctions responsible for so much suffering so easily blamed on the United States. Finally, toward Israel and the Palestinians, it will be time to put physical form onto President Bush's allusion of an eventual Palestinian state. Admittedly, neither side seems inclined to compromise, but we possess powerful financial and other levers to induce agreement.

Some may object that policies of "disinterested constructiveness" are unsuitable for the world's superpower, whose responsibility is primarily to forge its own destiny. To such claims I can only offer two counterarguments. The first is practical. The struggle against terrorism will not be won by seizing territory or capturing individuals. Those who hate us are loosely organized, dispersed among a civilian population, and extremely difficult to infiltrate. Right now, we are disliked so thoroughly in a number of Middle Eastern countries that the only reason we can consider some countries friendly is because they repress democracy and dissent. We will only know we have won this war when we have

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reduced hatred over our policies and resentment declines.

The second objection is moral, and it applies to a much smaller group than the general American public. As Christians, do we carry a duty to bring justice and peace where we can in the world? If, instead, we ignore others in their suffering while we enjoy prosperity, does God still allow nations to suffer punishment as a corrective?

Notes and References

1. Among many examples, see Andrew Sullivan, "This is a Religious War," *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2001.

2. Certainly countries like Denmark, Great Britain, France, and the various principalities of Germany maintained a state religion that influenced any number of domestic issues. My point is that foreign policy was one of the earliest areas freed from such influences.

3. The fashionable and politically correct designation "Common Era" for the Western calendar fails badly when discussing Islam. The Muslim lunar calendar (abbreviated A.H. for anno Hegirae) began in September 622. Given the existence of two faith-based calendars that disagree even on the number of days in a year, there is no Common Era between West and Islam. To assert that the Western calendar is "common" hints of (usually unintended) arrogance.

4. There are a number of interesting parallels between Muhammad and Ellen White, including a shared assertion among respective supporters that each was the final messenger predicted by the Apocalypse. Critics of each have suggested that epilepsy may account for the physical phenomena that accompanied the visions. One of the most thoughtful treatments of Muhammad's inspiration comes from a former communist, Maxime Rodinson. See his *Mohammed* (Penguin; various editions), especially chaps. 3 and 4, "Birth of a Prophet," and "Birth of a Sect."

5. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Collier Books/Macmillan, 1955), verses 15-40. This rather free translation seems closer in style to the King James Version of the Bible. Among the many translations, Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall's sacrifices literary beauty for closeness in translation.

6. The implication that Muhammad's circumstances shaped the messages from Allah is completely contrary to orthodox Islam, for the Qur'an is considered the *uncreated Word of God*, not God's ideas presented in the words of a human. Adventists who have struggled with the nature of prophetic inspiration can perhaps understand better than most Westerners the great Muslim anguish aroused a generation ago by Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which comically portrays Muhammad compromising his message to escape persecution. In this book, Muhammad's Persian scribe later alters the wording of visions, and Muhammad fails to recognize the changes.

7. *Al-Haramain* is the dual (two-item plural) form of *haram*, the protected or sacred place, applied to the private, family quarters of a home. Given Western images of sexually debauched Muslims, this word entered English as *harem*, the wives and concubines of a wealthy or powerful Muslim.

8. "The Table" 5:56 (Arberry's translation).

9. Henri Lammens, *Islam, Beliefs and Institutions, Beliefs and Institutions* (trans. 1929; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1968), esp. chap. 7, "The Sects of Islam." Undoubtedly dated and clearly biased, this work nevertheless provides more detailed scholarship than many later studies.

10. Hereditary rule often takes unusual forms in the Arab world. Succession passes among brothers of the late ruler in Saudi Arabia, and alternates between lines of cousins in Kuwait. The late King Hussein of Jordan had long designated his brother, Prince

Hasan, as heir, and only replaced him at the last minute, apparently after family disputes.

11. Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), 152. The section that follows reflects Khadduri's approaches to the subject.

12. Khadduri advocates the term (*ibid.*, 14-18) because God only rules indirectly. This conflicts with those who attempt to interpret early Muslim societies or the Hebrews under the Judges as a theocracy.

13. The treatment of these Qur'anic verses provides a guide to the inclinations of the translator, because 2:215, 9:41, 49:15, 61:10-13, and 66:9 have been translated either as "struggle" or "warfare."

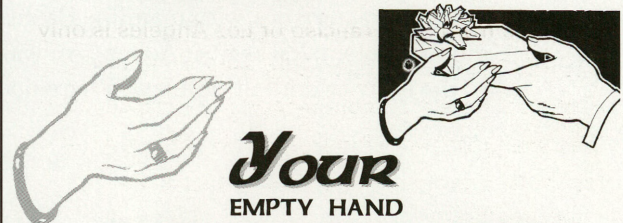
14. Readers over the age of twenty will remember that the United States saved Saudi Arabia from Iraqi threats during the Gulf War. Although many religious extremists in Saudi Arabia no doubt find Saddam Hussein a very objectionable character, they also seem to suspect that U.S. intervention really served America's self-interest by saving the Saudi ruling house and maintaining low world oil prices.

15. Laboring under a socialist-inspired delusion that they could create a single state in Palestine that included both Jews and Arabs, many members of the Palestine Liberation Organization were careful to distinguish between Zionists and Jews twenty or thirty years ago. From conversations I have heard in recent years, this polite resistance to anti-Semitism is gone, and the slogans written on the walls during the present intifada confirm this conclusion.

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